



# North Dakota Closes Loophole with PRIDE

By Mikel Chavers

It stemmed from sheer frustration.

In North Dakota, officials were downright frustrated with the lack of options available to deal with parents who do not pay their child support. Many of those parents become chronic nonpayers because they either can't—or won't—get a job.

It seemed the district courts were dealing with the same problem over and over. A nonpaying parent would tell the judge he or she couldn't get a job, and the judge would direct them to Job Service North Dakota, the state's Workforce Investment Act Agency, for help.

But too many times, left alone, the parent would fall through the cracks in the system. Child support remained unpaid and the parent still didn't have a job.

"You would have the same people coming back again and again," said District Judge Allan Schmalenberger of North Dakota's southwest judicial district. "I just can't find any jobs," they said."

Without a means to pay child support, many delinquent payers were being held in contempt of court. When this happens, they are usually sent to jail until they make a payment, said Mike Schwindt, director of the state's Child Support Enforcement Division.

But there had to be a better way, he thought.

"What we're trying to do is not put them in jail; what we really want to do is get people back to taking care of their kids," Schwindt said.

That's where the new program, the Parental Responsibility Initiative for the Development of Employment (nicknamed PRIDE), comes in. The program, a winner of one of CSG's Innovations Awards, closes the loophole between the judge and existing social services, connecting employment help services to parents who

aren't paying their child support.

Once the program started in April 2005, a PRIDE coordinator could meet with parents immediately after a hearing and provide the help necessary to find and retain employment.

The project blends case management skills, job skills improvement services, job placement services and supportive services to help a noncustodial parent obtain or improve employment so he or she is able to make child support payments.

"It has made a world of difference to us," Schmalenberger said. He estimates that since its inception, the program has cut the number of return offenders to court in half.

PRIDE coordinators were finding that some of the chronic nonpayers weren't making child support payments because they were underemployed or unemployed due to a disability, a mental health issue or a substance abuse issue.

Under the PRIDE program, these parents are connected to services that already exist under the state's Health and Human Services division, such as substance abuse counseling.

In that realm, Schwindt tells of a mother and father who were addicted to methamphetamines. Their children were in foster care and an order was issued against each parent to pay child support.

In that case, the parents were sent to addiction treatment through PRIDE and were able to kick the habit, Schwindt said, adding that the two were able to find and retain jobs with the help of human services and job services.

But PRIDE is not just about counseling.

More than the services offered, PRIDE seeks to help parents overcome obstacles. Through January, PRIDE spent nearly \$26,000 on aid such as car repairs, day

care, work clothes, transportation, licenses and other tools meant to help parents look for and obtain a job.

"You didn't have one piece working in one direction and another working in another direction," Schwindt said. All of the relative issues were addressed and tracked with PRIDE, he said, and the program illustrates multiple branches of government working together.

The project started first in pilot programs in southwest and northeast North Dakota. So far 74 percent of participating parents have obtained employment, taking on average just short of two months to find a job.

The PRIDE program is funded by state grants approved by the North Dakota legislature, and this year, the aim is to expand PRIDE to all parts of the state.

## Fast Facts

- The estimated cost to expand the PRIDE program statewide is \$555,000 annually, funding the salaries and operating costs for seven and a half positions.
- With PRIDE, the average monthly child support payment increased more than 88 percent.
- Under the program, there was an 18.5 percent decrease in the rate of nonpayment of child support.
- Public assistance benefits to support the parents or parents' dependents decreased \$123,490 per case in the six months following referral to PRIDE.